

Letter from Autism Working Group to Haringey Council Leader Claire Kober 17 December 2014

Dear Cllr Kober,

Re: Cuts to services for people with autism and complex needs in Haringey

We are shocked to hear of the proposed major cuts to services for vulnerable adults in Haringey, made public on 11 December in the Council's draft corporate plan and medium term financial strategy. These cuts will bear very severely on people with autism and complex needs and have been announced without any review of need. Furthermore there has been no attempt to consult with all those (including people with autism, their families and carers and staff in various support services) who are going to be affected.

You will recall that, on 5 November 2013 and 16 January 2014, you met family members and carers who were concerned about the use of reviews of care packages to drive down costs, without giving due consideration to the particular needs of the individuals concerned. In the course of these discussions, it was accepted that the council would not reduce funding without a comprehensive review of needs. It was also accepted that the further implementation of policy in this area would proceed in consultation with an Autism Working Group, formed with a view to establishing an Autism Partnership Board. Yet, despite engaging over the past year in a series of meetings with council officers in pursuit of these objectives, we now discover plans to implement even more drastic and wide-ranging cuts.

- Care packages

The council plans to reduce spending on individual care packages and residential placements for vulnerable adults by almost £10m (around 20% of the current budget). This is likely to result in pressure to transfer individuals to supported living projects run by the lowest cost providers – who rely on poorly paid staff, often lacking in relevant skills and experience, with limited training opportunities. This will lead to a high turnover of staff and a loss of continuity and quality of care. Some individuals with complex needs and challenging behaviours will be transferred 'into the community' – in some cases into the care of ageing parents and other carers. Contrary to the presumption that this will provide a higher level of care, it is likely to put more pressure on families, resulting in crises in which emergency care becomes necessary. This is not only a false economy, it is also likely to lead to admissions to 'Winterbourne View'-type institutions – exactly what the recent Bubb Report aims to avoid. Furthermore if these cuts are implemented, we believe the council will be unable to comply with its legal responsibilities under the Care Act 2014, which include strengthening support for carers.

- Day opportunities

The council plans to close three of the four day centres in the borough, including the one at Roundway, the only day service in Haringey designed for people with autistic spectrum

conditions. This is justified by the presumed superiority of services provided in the community over 'buildings-based' services. But some people with autism (who may experience high levels of anxiety and present challenging behaviours) need the sort of consistent and structured service currently provided in a secure and familiar place with staff who have relevant training and experience – and who have built up relationships with the people using their services. Furthermore, there is often limited scope for community-based activities and people may find themselves seeing a succession of poorly-paid carers (often lacking in training or experience).

- Social workers

The plan to cut social work staff by 25% will increase the risk of people with autism being subjected to diverse forms of abuse and exploitation. Even at current staffing levels social workers are struggling to provide adequate safeguarding procedures for vulnerable adults in the community; the cuts are likely to make a bad situation worse.

- Consultation

We are concerned that the council's engagement with the autism community in the borough has acquired the character of a series of perfunctory and token gestures. The proposed meeting of the Autism Working Group in November was cancelled at short notice and no further meeting has been arranged. We were not even consulted about the allocation of the Autism Innovation Fund Capital Grant. In all these circumstances, it seems that these committees and meetings have come to serve a more useful service in legitimising the council's pursuit of the policies of austerity rather than advancing the interests of people with autism in the borough.

Yours sincerely,

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